

inson recently said, referring specifically to the works of Flannery O'Connor, another religious writer with a connection to the Iowa Writers' Workshop, "but virtually none with a loving heart." Robinson, pouring her love into the objects of her creation, allows her characters to be transformed by goodness and by grace. At a time when so much in our culture brings people down, Robinson, in telling the story of Lila's struggle from fear and loneliness to love and grace, writes to inspire and elevate the human soul—and this, to readers, is infectious.

## Old wine in new bottles

*Christopher Clark*

*The Sleepwalkers:*

*How Europe Went to War in 1914.*

Harper, 736 pages, \$29.99

*reviewed by Stephen Schuker*

From the 1960s onward, evidence has accumulated that German leaders took advantage of a Balkan crisis to deliberately launch World War I. Moreover, the Reich clung to such ambitious war aims that, despite the tragic blood-letting, no compromise peace stood a chance. Christopher Clark's thought-provoking book boldly challenges the prevailing consensus.

An Australian teaching at Cambridge who previously authored an admiring history of Prussia, Clark apparently reads every major language spoken from the Atlantic to the Urals. He brings vast knowledge of the secondary literature to his task. He writes fluently. He etches landscapes and people with a novelist's sensibility.

Clark deploys his literary virtuosity to make two fundamental arguments, one implicitly at variance with the other. First, he declines to play "the blame game" concerning the 1914 slide into war. When nations have conflicting objectives, it is "meaningless" to call one enterprise more right or wrong than the other. All the same, Clark freely offers value judgments about other conflicts. Thus he has no trouble assigning guilt for the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05 to Russia or in saying that in 1911 Italy launched an "unprovoked" war of conquest in Libya. He

likewise waxes indignant over Serbian savagery against civilians in the follow-on Balkan Wars. Only in the outbreak of World War I does he principally see a signaling problem.

Here we witness "rapid-fire interactions between executive structures with a relatively poor understanding of each other's intentions, operating with low levels of confidence and trust." That contention will appeal to political scientists who consider multipolar systems unstable because of a so-called security dilemma. Each actor tends to increase its armaments owing to threat perception. But no one feels more secure in the end. The 1914 scenario has contemporary relevance because we live again in an uncertain world with several power centers and terrorist movements controlled by none.

Notwithstanding this theoretical stance, Clark conveys indirectly, through a description of personalities, where his fundamental sympathies lie. He displays estimable virtuosity in juggling developments in six major powers, yet sees them all from the vantage point of Berlin. An "economic miracle" had transformed the German economy. In a few decades, that country's industrial output had forged ahead from one-fifth the size of England's to a position surpassing the latter. Still, Germanophobes in the British Foreign Office had an "almost comical tendency" to view British imperialism as natural and expect the Reich to punch below its weight in world affairs. With the tightening of the Franco-Russian alliance, Germany found itself surrounded by jealous states, even though it had done nothing to justify formation of the hostile Entente in 1907.

In these challenging circumstances, German leaders remained comparatively prudent. Clark particularly admires Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, "a steady, moderate, and formidable figure" who dominated the governmental machine: "the primacy of the civilian over the military leadership remained intact." True, Chief of Staff Helmuth von Moltke and Prussian War Minister Erich von Falkenhayn advocated preventive war, but Moltke had excellent justification for believing that Germany's future relative position would deteriorate. In any event, the Kaiser, though given to bouts of belligerent rhetoric, opposed

preventive war and always counseled caution when conflict loomed.

Clark evinces no similar indulgence toward Entente leaders. In fact, the hint of a double standard emerges. In the run-up to the 1914 Balkan crisis, for example, the French president Raymond Poincaré and the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Sazonov referred to firmness as a way to “safeguard peace by the demonstration of force.” The German documents, by contrast, “speak more directly of war as . . . a necessity.” Clark helpfully explains that “the difference is discursive rather than substantial.” The linguistic asymmetry is by no means a “symptom of German militarism or war-lust”; it merely reflects Clausewitz’s impact on German political thought.

Without exception, Clark considers the major Entente leaders on the eve of war a rum lot. He holds Sazonov and War Minister V. A. Sukhomlinov responsible for persuading the Tsar to mobilize and thereby obliging the Germans to declare war. Russia, he charges, plotted to dismember the Hapsburg Empire and feed the pieces to its “hungry satellites.” William Fuller, the great authority on Russian strategy, explains the backstory differently. Until 1912, the Russian army positioned itself for war in Asia. Thereafter, it scrambled to redeploy for possible hostilities in the west, partly to placate the French, who would have to pay for double-tracking the rail lines. But rearmament would not reach completion until 1917. In the meantime, it would take forty days to carry out concentration. The Tsar initially proposed partial mobilization as a simple “signal” to Austria, and yielded only after a showing that this move would delay full mobilization. The Russian army entered the war in a mood of funereal gloom.

Clark is equally censorious about the French. Poincaré pursued the “nationalist, jingoistic, and chauvinist politics” that formed a distinguishing feature of Gallic public life. Most accounts represent Poincaré as a cautious politician who, conscious of Berlin’s strategic dispositions, gave categorical assurances of support to the Tsar out of concern for French security. Clark rejects the notion that France, with a declining population, might logically

fear an overbearing, larger neighbor. In his telling, France figured as the instigator of the two Moroccan crises of 1905 and 1911 and Germany as the wronged party innocently seeking the Open Door. French and Russian strategists, he concedes, did not actually “plan to launch a war of aggression,” but they gave little thought to the effect of their brinkmanship on the Reich.

Conventional accounts portray British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey as working tirelessly to keep the peace. Clark vehemently disagrees. Obsessed with Germany and ignorant of the world, Grey packed the Foreign Office with his epigones and hid his maneuvers from the Cabinet. He never came clean about his moral commitment to France, and that made British policy wobble perilously in the final days. The Cabinet ultimately decided for war not merely because Germany violated Belgian neutrality, but also for self-interested imperial reasons—to obviate Russian designs on Persia and India. In short, Clark’s account of the countdown to war reverses the current orthodoxy.

A bitter controversy over war culpability erupted at the 1919 peace conference. The Versailles treaty included no war-guilt clause. To establish a predicate for reparations, however, John Foster Dulles of the American delegation drafted an article requiring Germany to accept civil responsibility for all damage imposed upon the Allies. The fledgling Weimar government reacted strongly to this stain upon its honor and perceived an opportunity to undermine reparations as well. It established a Foreign Ministry division to combat war guilt. During the 1920s, that unit published fifty-seven volumes of doctored diplomatic documents stretching back to 1871 and funded a panoply of scholars who deemed the Versailles imputation unfair. In 1930 the Nazi Reichstag delegation demanded the death penalty for anyone admitting war guilt. The official campaign proved wildly successful. Even following World War II, many serious people distinguished sharply between German aims in the two world wars.

In 1961, after years of painstaking labor in East as well as West German archives, Fritz Fischer published his blockbuster, later translated as *Germany’s Aims in the First World War*, demonstrating Germany’s primary responsibility after

all. At first Fischer's findings elicited widespread outrage. *Der Spiegel* accused him of befouling his own nest; the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft withdrew a speaking-tour subvention. Yet eventually Fischer's work made its way. Refinements by Imanuel Geiss, John Röhl, Holger Afflerbach, Annika Mombauer, and others have confirmed the essentials.

We now know that Kaiser Wilhelm assembled a Crown Council in December 1912 at which the military brass urged preventive war. The admirals preferred to wait eighteen months until completion of the Kiel Canal. The conferees came to no firm conclusions except to strengthen the army, but the prevailing sentiment was clear. Social Darwinist theory had a large purchase on the public mind. Majority opinion in elite circles considered a racial conflict between the Teuton and Slav "races" inevitable. The military held firm to the Schlieffen Plan for a two-front war. It could envisage no other scenario. The plan required striking through neutral Belgium to knock France out of the war before Russia could concentrate its forces. If one waited until Russia completed its strategic railroad network five years hence, the plan would no longer work. Meanwhile, war would generate popular enthusiasm and undercut Socialist demands for Prussian franchise reform.

German policymakers saw the assassination of the Austrian heir apparent with Serbian government complicity in June 1914 as an opportunity. The murder put the latter country's allies, Russia and France, in a compromising position. In the first July week, the Kaiser, Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg, the army and navy chiefs, and the top Foreign Office decision-makers agreed to proceed. One tactical disagreement remained. Bethmann favored diplomatic efforts to keep England neutral. He likewise sought to maneuver Russia into mobilizing first so that the Socialists, numbering one-third of the Reichstag, would view hostilities as defensive. The military deprecated hesitation for any reason. The Schlieffen Plan depended on split-second timing. Once launched, it would brook no delay.

How does Clark deal with this evidence? He simply ignores it. He dismisses the Fischer thesis as a residue of "the fraught process by which German intellectuals came to terms with the

contaminating moral legacy of the Nazi era." In fact, since his methodology posits systemic causation, he concentrates less on Germany than on other lands. He doesn't touch on the undemocratic structure of Wilhelmine governance. This is *Hamlet* without the prince. No doubt Clark has dipped into original sources at discrete points, enough to sprinkle archival holy water on his footnotes. Essentially, however, his synthesis rests upon the work of others. He also makes extensive use of the interwar documentary collections that he admits were doctored for political purposes. No surprise that his interpretation would have gratified the Weimar Foreign Ministry.

It is a tribute to Clark's sparkling prose that the Anglo-American press has nonetheless hailed his study as a masterpiece. *The Spectator* wondered, tongue in cheek, whether the author might turn up for lecture in a spiked helmet, but evidentiary problems that might distress professionals have scarcely registered with the public. In Germany, *Sleepwalkers* has become a media sensation. Quality newspapers in the Federal Republic take scholarship more seriously than do their American counterparts, and a lively debate has raged for months. Some assert that Clark has reshaped German identity. Herfried Münkler of the Free University of Berlin, whose own book on 1914-18 has won acclaim, observes that, if all powers shared responsibility for the war, the Versailles treaty judgment cannot stand. Since Versailles helped fuel the rise of Hitler and a second war, the Federal Republic was deprived of its Eastern territories unfairly (not that it claims them back). Andreas Wirsching of the Munich Institute of Contemporary History counters that, given the constructive role their country plays in contemporary Europe, his compatriots should overcome both the tendency toward self-pity and feelings of eternal guilt. And Volker Ullrich, the political editor of *Die Zeit*, in an article pointedly entitled "Now They're Slithering Again," stresses that, notwithstanding the fireworks, Clark has turned up little new documentation. The debate bears witness to the vigor of democracy in the Federal Republic. Germans can regain sovereignty over their history without revising an unfortunate past.

Copyright of New Criterion is the property of Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.